

## Lecture Notes

# "A Rose for Emily"

Faulkner's famous line about the South: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." (from *Requiem for a Nun*, 1951)

### **What is the point of view of the story and what purpose does it serve?**

1st person (plural) peripheral observer. Since the narrator, although one of the townspeople, is an outsider to the central events in the story, he is aware of the true facts on a piecemeal and hearsay basis until the very end. His lack of direct information and his naive conjectures serve to create suspense and the horror that the story builds towards.

### **What is the attitude of the narrator toward Miss Emily?**

The narrator (and townspeople) are ambivalent in their feelings towards Miss Emily. She is spoken of as being "dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse." Since she is a member of one of the "old" families in a tradition-bound culture with an aristocratic hierarchy, she is held in awe and respect by those of the lower classes such as the narrator. Because of her firmness of character, courage, and independence, she arouses admiration and respect in others; yet, since her actions are extremely strange, suggestive even of insanity, she is also regarded with a kind of sympathetic condescension. Thus she is both "looked up to" and "looked down upon."

### **What atmosphere is created early in the story, and how is this done?**

It is one of decay and ruin, almost gothic in the degree of exaggeration. This is done through stressing the physical environment of Miss Emily. The odor of decay hangs about the old frame house "that had once been white with its cupolas, spires, and scrolled balconies," vestiges of a bygone era just as Miss Emily is a vestige of the old South with its aristocratic, genteel ways of intense pride. The street on which the house is situated had once been the most select one in town; now it harbors garages, gas pumps, and cotton gins. The remnants of Miss Emily's former life have been swallowed up in sordidness and decay.

### **What is the mood of the story and how is it established?**

It is one of slowly building suspense and horror, built by the mention of details which prepare for the final macabre discovery of the skeleton on the bed. A gruesome pall is cast upon the story from the very beginning and culminates in the funeral of Miss Emily and the discovery of the skeletal remains of her lover.

### **How does the remission of taxes by Col. Sartoris serve as a motivating enveloping circumstance?**

Col. Sartoris is depicted as a benevolent tyrant who controlled the destinies of the townspeople. With a wave of his hand, he could declare that black women must not appear on the streets unless wearing an apron (a relic from the days of slavery), and that someone needn't pay taxes. These are the acts of a man who believes he can control fate and cushion human life against adversities. It is this same reasoning, then, that later is manifested in Miss Emily as she tries to control fate and hold off death by ignoring it.

### **What is the significance of Miss Emily's refusal to pay taxes and her resistance to the burial of her father's corpse?**

Both of these actions indicate her refusal to bow to reality. She has a such a fixed notion of what life should be like that she refuses to recognize what it *is* like in reality. Her refusal to permit burial of her father's corpse indicates her defiance of death and prepares for her attitude toward the death of Homer Barron. To Emily, the dead aren't dead if she chooses to regard them as living.

**Aside from being divorced from reality, how is Emily characterized by her actions over the taxes and the purchase of arsenic?**

She is a person of strong, forceful character who can exert her will over others. Even though the city fathers are empowered to act legally against her, they are cowed and deterred by her inflexible will. When she buys the poison, she completely intimidates the druggist into compliance with her request on her terms of no-questions-asked. She is a person whose pride is indomitable and whose will is not to be brooked.

**What is the symbol of the tableau described by the narrator -- that of the sprawled figure of Emily's father with horsewhip in hand and sitting between her and the outside world?**

The whip represents the jealous concern for the honor and virginity of southern white womanhood too good for most men. Its presence in the hands of a tyrannical, family-proud father represents a barrier between Emily and the world, between her and matrimony, forcing her into lonely spinsterhood and her socially questionable liaison with a Yankee "day-laborer" after her father's death.

**What events foreshadow the discovery of the skeleton in the upstairs bedroom?**

1. Miss Emily's stubborn refusal to bury her father.
2. The mention of the stench about Miss Emily's house shortly after her sweetheart "has deserted" her.
3. The disappearance of Homer after he had been seen being admitted to her house.
4. Miss Emily's purchase of the arsenic.
5. The references to insanity in the family.

**What character trait provides the motivation for Miss Emily's central action in the story and how is it used?**

Her unyielding pride. Being jilted and having it publicly known would be too severe a blow to a Southern lady of the gentility. She has contemptuously ignored public opinion, which regards her as a "fallen woman" for being seen with a "Yankee day-laborer." To be thrown over by him and have it known to one and all would heap insufferable shame on Miss Emily. She will, therefore, prevent this from happening by making it impossible for him to "leave" her.

**What is the central conflict in the story?**

The main conflict is between Miss Emily and reality. Reality demands that taxes be paid, that the dead be buried, that social decorum be observed, and that one adjust to disappointments in life, but Miss Emily refuses to do any of these things.

**How is Miss Emily's "victory" made possible?**

Through her insanity, she triumphs over reality. She becomes so far removed from reality that she is no longer responsive to its conditions. It is her madness that makes it possible for her to triumph over her circumstances. Had she remained sane, she would have been defeated by the pressures of life and society.

**What element of tragic greatness resides in Miss Emily's character and redeems her story from being simply a case study in abnormal psychology?**

She is absolutely uncompromising in her battle with life and reality. She bravely defies the forces formed against her and never asks for pity or mercy. She suffers in silence and carries on without a whimper. Her actions are gruesome and horrible, but there is a quality of dignity and courage about her that commands respect.

**How does the title relate to the story?**

A rose is a flower of tribute and a symbol of youth, beauty, and love. As one preserves a rose by pressing it within the pages of a book, so Emily has preserved her rose--her love, her youth, her happiness--by decorating the room as a bridal chamber and keeping it that way with her lover there beside her forever.

**What theme arises out of the story's conflict and resolution?**

Through insanity, one can triumph over reality. Through madness, one can gain an emotionally satisfying triumph over fate and circumstance by reshaping reality, forcing it to conform to the heart's desire.